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Creating the Enemy, Constructing the Threat

The Diffusion of Repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East

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Introduction

Scholarship on the international dimensions of authoritarianism has taken a new dimension with the increasing interest in the diffusion of autocratic policies and ideas, which has gained academic currency. While the literature has identified some mechanisms of autocratic diffusion, it has so far failed to specify why, and under which conditions, these mechanisms lead to diffusion. The literature almost exclusively focuses on "positive" cases where autocratic ideas and policies spread successfully. There are, however, counterintuitive cases where actors do not adopt particular autocratic policies despite the presence of causal mechanisms conducive for diffusion.[1] This article tackles this often-unexplored variation in diffusion by examining why some, but not all, autocratic regimes converge with repressive policies. This article examines this puzzle with a focus on the variation in the diffusion of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB thereafter) undertaken by authoritarian regimes[2] across the Middle East after 2013.

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, the MB and its offshoots emerged as the main beneficiary of the destabilisation of several long-lived authoritarian regimes across the region. During the 2011 elections in Tunisia after the overthrow of Ben Ali, the Islamist

movement won 40 per cent of the seats in the parliament, with the al-Nahda Party forming the first post-revolutionary government. In November 2011, the Justice and Development Party won 107 out of 395 parliamentary seats in Morocco. In 2012, the MB in Egypt—represented by the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)—won 46 per cent of the seats in the parliament. In 2012, the MB candidate Mohamed Morsi became the first democratically-elected president of Egypt. In Libya, the Islamists played a major role in the overthrow of Gadhafi and evolved into the primary actor during the transition period. In Yemen, the MB—predominant in the al-Islah party—emerged as the main beneficiary of the transition following the overthrow of President Saleh. [3]

Following a coup d'état that removed President Morsi from power, the military-backed interim government in Egypt declared the MB to be a terrorist group on 25 December 2013. This declaration had wide regional reverberations. Although the group had never been granted formal judicial authorisation for their decades-long political participation, it was to some degree accepted both by the regime and society since President Gamal Abdel Nasser until President Hosni Mubarak.[4] The group was labelled neither a threat to national security nor a terrorist organisation. The regime's claim that the country is facing an existential threat from the MB not only legalises repressive policies against the organisation but also enables mass mobilisation behind repression.[5]

As labelling the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation has been effective in mobilising Egyptians behind the harsh crackdown of the group, the Saudi Kingdom has adopted the same method to counteract the MB regionally.[6] Since Iran's Islamic Revolution (1979), the Saudi Kingdom had relied on a version of Sunni Islam to legitimise its regime. The rise of the MB to power in Egypt in the post-2011 order constituted a critical threat to the Kingdom's distinctiveness. The MB, offering an alternative narrative of Sunni Islam, constituted a source of identity risk to the Kingdom.

The crackdown against the MB emerged as an opportunity structure for the Kingdom to reassert the superiority of its Islamic narrative.[7]

On 7 March 2014, the Kingdom designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation alongside two other groups—the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—and attempted to form a regional coalition against the MB under the banner of fighting terrorism. The Kingdom exerted considerable pressure on other regimes to follow by declaring the group as terrorist. In November 2014, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) designated the Brotherhood local affiliates as terrorists. Despite Saudi pressure, Jordan, Bahrain, and Kuwait explicitly refused to do so. This article, then, investigates why some authoritarian regimes supported the designation of the MB as a terrorist organisation whereas others have resisted it despite Saudi pressure. This article sheds light on the dynamics leading to the diffusion of repression while focusing on the discrepancy in the recipient states' autocratic (non-)convergence.

While the literature has identified mechanisms of autocratic diffusion, this inner logic of diffusion remains subject of debate. Whereas some scholars argue that ideology inspires emulation leading to diffusion, others argue that authoritarian regimes are foremost driven by pragmatic self-interest related to regimes' quest for survival. The diffusion of repression against the MB, I argue, provides a compelling case contributing to the ideology-interest debate. Although Jordan, Bahrain, and Kuwait share with Saudi Arabia the same regime type and converging regional interests in supporting the crackdown on the MB in Egypt, they varied paradoxically in adopting repression against the MB in their domestic spheres. These cases provide insights on the outcome rather than the mechanisms of diffusion. While the Saudi Kingdom emerged as an autocratic regional power adopting coercive mechanisms of autocratic diffusion, some recipient states followed its lead in designating the MB as terrorist whereas others resisted.

I build on the assumption that states on the receiving side of diffusion are primarily driven by self-interest. Autocratic regime interest is not, however, one-dimensional. Instead, survival is the result of interaction between two dynamics: the regime's regional interests in joining counter-revolutionary efforts and domestic authoritarian structures. This article argues that monocausal approaches to diffusion cannot capture the complexities of autocratic diffusion. It posits that IR approaches can bring novel insights enriching the research programme on the international diffusion of authoritarianism. Drawing on neoclassical realism (NCR) in IR theory, I propose a framework combining systemic structures at the regional level with domestic constraints, the interaction of which can explain the variation in the recipient states' behaviour towards the MB. States' convergence with regional repressive policies is the result of interaction between regime interest at the regional level—which is driven by the position of the state within the region as well as its dependency on a regional autocratic power for survival—and the regime's relative autonomy vis-à-vis societal groups. If regimes enjoy relative autonomy vis-à-vis the society, they are likely to adopt repressive policies at the domestic level while pursuing their regional interests. When regimes are, however, less autonomous from societal groups, they are likely to take foreign policy decisions that might endanger their regional interests.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, I situate the topic within the scholarship on the diffusion of autocratic policies, identifying a lacuna in theorising why policies spread in some cases but not in others. I propose a theoretical framework combining variables from two levels of analysis: regime regional interest and the regime's relative autonomy at the domestic level. Afterwards, I explore the role of Saudi Arabia as an autocratic regional power using coercive mechanisms in diffusing repressive policies against the MB. I, then, examine the convergence of the UAE with Saudi repressive

policies against the Brotherhood and contrast it with the non-convergence in the cases of Jordan, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

Interest and Ideology in the Diffusion of Autocratic Policies

The literature on the international dimensions of authoritarianism has adopted a number of concepts and mechanisms from the democratisation literature.[8] One of these concepts is "diffusion," which refers to the transmission of ideas, institutions, policies, or behaviour from one actor to another. Strang states that diffusion occurs when "prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters."[9]Solingen presents a more detailed conceptualisation of diffusion as a process with four dimensions: (1) the *stimuli*, or a triggering event, (2) *a medium*, which is the context or milieu through which the initial stimuli may travel, (3) *social agents* affected by the stimuli, who aid or block the effects as they travel to other destinations, and (4) *outcomes* that enable differentiation between several degrees of diffusion.[10]

The literature underlines various causal mechanisms of diffusion, including learning, emulation, persuasion, coercion, signalling, competition, socialisation, shaming, bargaining, and manipulation of utility calculations.[11] This list reflects an implicit debate over the level of intentionality associated with diffusion. Some scholars, such as Elkins and Simmons, argue that diffusion is distinctive in that the prior adopter does not intend the export of policies or ideas to others.[12] Others focused on active coercive mechanisms—including imposition, coercion, and conditionality.[13] This article takes a middle ground between these two positions. On the one hand, "change agents"[14]—or the *stimuli* in Solingen's words—can intentionally seek to disseminate autocratic policies through vertical linkage. On the other, recipients are "social agents" who can block or

allow this dissemination to travel.[15]

The literature has, however, concentrated on "diffusion" as a process rather than an outcome.[16] Diffusion is seen as the process conducive to the spread particular policies, ideas, and behaviour. Hence, diffusion is not equivalent to "convergence," that is, the increase in policy similarities across actors.[17] Nevertheless, the literature has not provided a systematic explanation of the variation in (non-)convergence within the diffusion process.[18] Despite the presence of similar mechanisms of diffusion, there is little knowledge as to why some actors adopt diffused policies whereas others refrain.

The motives driving authoritarian regimes to adopt diffused policies are subject to disagreement. From a realist perspective, authoritarian regimes are rationalist actors driven by self-regarding interests. Henceforth, authoritarian regimes converge in their policies when they share similar threats. Odinius and Kuntz[19] explain the conditions under which states decide to support fellow autocrats through counter-diffusion policies. Drawing on poliheuristic foreign policy analysis, they hypothesize that if regimes perceive the situation in other authoritarian countries as similar to their own domestic situation, they are likely to undertake policies shoring up those regimes. Henceforth, they explain why Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC thereafter) countries supported authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain while supporting revolutionary movements Libya and Syria. Weyland employs causal mechanisms based on bounded rationality to examine leaders' perceptions of threat from revolutionary waves in Europe during the inter-war period and in Latin American during the 1960s and 1970s, which explains the spread of counter-diffusion policies in these cases.[20] Yet, the designation of the MB in Egypt as a terrorist organisation and the diffusion of repression in the region challenges this realist perspective. Although Jordan, Kuwait, and

Bahrain shared Saudi regional interests in overthrowing the MB in Egypt, they did not follow in adopting the terrorist designation in their own domestic spheres.

Other scholars argue that ideologies are the main drivers of state behaviour. Ideology is defined as "leaders' preferences for ordering the political world, both domestically and internationally. Hence, ideologies are the idiosyncratic political principles and goals that leaders both value most highly and use to legitimate their claim to rule."[21] Some scholars argue that ideology is the driver behind the diffusion of autocratic policies. Vanderhill argues that ideological agreement as well as shared historical and cultural experiences affect the degree to which autocratic elites are receptive to external pressure for policy convergence.[22] Accordingly, actors with ideological affinities are more likely to converge in their autocratic policies. The diffusion of repressive policies against the MB, however, challenges this argument. Although Kuwait, Jordan, and Bahrain share with Saudi Arabia a monarchical regime type, their ideological affinities have not led to a policy convergence towards the Brotherhood. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and Qatar share strands of Sunni Islam. Yet, they diverged on policy choices towards the MB.

In the remainder of this article, I present a theoretical framework to explain the variation in the recipient states' convergence with Saudi policies. I argue that recipient countries are motivated by regime interest; that is, I highlight the interaction between regional and domestic constraints. I then explore how the Saudi Kingdom has played the role of an autocratic regional power in promoting repression against the MB threat through external pressure and enticement. I finally investigate how recipients have diverged between subsequent adopters and resisters.

Explaining Autocratic (Non)convergence

A Neoclassical Realist Approach

The designation of the MB as a terrorist organisation across the region constitutes a good illustration where autocratic diffusion has resulted in the convergence of repression in some cases but not in others. In order to unpack the decision-making process leading to convergence in repression, this section presents a theoretical framework that explores how regimes react when they are under pressure from regional powers to adopt repression in their domestic sphere.

I propose a theoretical framework based on NCR, combining insights from IR theory and foreign policy analysis.[23] Rose defines NCR as an approach that:

> explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematising certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level.[24]

In examining the decision-making context in which authoritarian regimes decide whether to converge or not with the regional autocratic power, this framework combines three steps in a causal chain: material interests at the regional level (independent variable), domestic level structures (intervening variable), and policy choice (the outcome of diffusion). Hence, the behaviour of autocratic regimes, when faced with external pressures from a regional autocratic power, is the result of the interaction between: (1) the dependence on regional powers in the pursuit of regional interests and (2) the autonomy of the ruling elite from societal groups.

The first stage in the argument is the relative power of the state within the region, which determines its responsiveness to external pressures. Autocratic regimes are driven by motives pertaining to security against threats within and without. Regime

survival can be driven by geopolitical interests, such as maintaining the security of the state against external threats and preventing spillovers threatening domestic stability.[25] Authoritarian regimes are seeking survival in an unfavourable regional environment, while facing external and internal threats. The regional structure provides states with opportunities and constraints and, hence, shapes their interests, which are related to the capabilities and the relative power distribution. Authoritarian regimes can depend on their own resources to secure their interests and survival, but they can rely on others through alliances and foreign aid.

The second element in this causal chain is the domestic intervening variable, which specifies how systemic pressures are translated into policy choices. Although states may share converging interests at the regional level, they can undertake divergent foreign policy choices. The consideration of domestic processes as filters between systemic pressures and policy choices goes a long way towards explaining diffusion outcomes. I argue here that the structure of the governing coalition and the regime autonomy vis-à-vis domestic groups matter.[26] Monarchies, like all authoritarian regimes, rest upon a winning coalition that is linking social constituencies to the ruling family. The regime autonomy, I argue, rests upon the institutional structure of the regime's coalitional commitment. Different paths of state formation led to various institutional outcomes in the Middle East.[27] Whereas rulers can either supress or destroy opposition groups and maintain a very exclusive narrow coalition, as in Saudi Arabia. In other cases, the ruling elite is a broader, inclusive coalition, which allows social groups a limited freedom of manoeuvre in the political process, either in a weak parliament or a party system, as in Kuwait and Jordan.

This regime relative autonomy can affect the pursuit of regional interests.[28] Regimes' reaction to the diffusion of repression is the result of interaction between their

regional interests and domestic structures. If regimes rest upon an exclusive ruling coalition allowing a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the society, they are likely to adopt repression at the domestic level to ensure their regional interests. When regimes are, however, dependent on broader ruling coalition making them less autonomous vis-à-vis the society, they are likely to resist the diffusion of repression while risking their regional interests. Adopting repressive policies can endanger the coalitional commitment that guarantees the regime survival. In this case, the logic of regime survival is likely to take precedence over regional economic profits or interests.

To illustrate this argument, I examine the cases of (non-)convergence of Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and the UAE with Saudi repression towards the MB. The selection of the cases recipient of diffusion is based on the variation within the dependent variable (i.e. outcome of diffusion). Whereas Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan abstained from adopting repressive policies despite their linkage with the Saudi Kingdom, the UAE followed the Saudi path. To unpack the intervening variables leading to various diffusion outcomes, I chose these cases as they share antecedent conditions—such as strong linkage with the Saudi Kingdom, the monarchical regime type, shared regional interest, and a domestic opposition constituted of MB offshoot. Hence, the case studies are "heuristic cases,"[29] which are selected based on the variation in the dependent variable to serve the purpose of identifying the causal path leading to different outcomes. Other monarchies that did not share these initial conditions do not fit the scope of the study. Qatar, for example, challenged the Saudi Kingdom regionally and did not share the same regional interest in undermining the MB in Egypt.

The following section examines the role of Saudi Arabia in pressuring other regimes to adopt repression against the MB in their own domestic spheres. I will then use this theoretical framework to examine how various states in the region responded to

Saudi diffusion.

Saudi Arabia: An Aspiring Authoritarian Regional Power

Following the overthrow of President Morsi,[30] the military regime in Egypt legitimised its crackdown on the MB through portraying the group as radical, threatening the existence of the Egyptian state. On 24 July 2013, General al-Sissi stated that "[the MB] are some who want to take the country to a critical curve."[31] This narrative culminated with the formal designation of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation on 25 December 2013, which successfully mobilised the people behind the regime.[32] On 7 March 2014, the Saudi Kingdom declared the group to be a terrorist organisation.[33] This declaration had regional reverberations since the Saudi Kingdom aimed at building a coalition to eradicate the MB across the region. Despite the assumption that Saudi Arabia is promoting autocracy in the Middle East,[34] its regional policies, especially in diffusing repression against the MB, fit what Tansey calls 'democracy resistance'.[35] This Saudi endeavour can be regarded as an act shaped by the combination of the Kingdom's geopolitical interests and its fear of the rise of the MB as an ideological competitor in Egypt, threatening the Saudi acclaimed Sunni leadership in the region.

Following the 2011 uprisings, Saudi Arabia emerged as the primary counter-revolutionary force in the region.[36] Saudi efforts in building a regional coalition against the MB under its leadership highlighted the Kingdom's role as an aspiring regional power. The roots of this behaviour can be traced back to the pre-2011 period. Following the 2003 Iraq War, the regional balance of power demonstrated an unprecedented Arab weakness. Iraq's military power faded, leaving a void that several countries competed to fill. Two regional blocs emerged. The first includes, on the one hand, the so-called "Resistance Axis" based on an alliance between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas. The

second evolved as the Saudis attempted to bolster alliances with Jordan and Egypt to craft a countering axis, in response to what the Saudi Kingdom perceived as Iranian ambitions.[37] With the outbreak of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, and the on-going instability in Iraq, Riyadh found itself surrounded by instability. The Kingdom perceived its network of allies—upon which it relied to ensure its geopolitical interests—collapsing. The Saudis perceived the rise of the MB to power in Egypt as a threat to their claims of Sunni leadership.[38]

Regime change, shifting alliance, and the prominence of non-state actors contributed to Saudi Arabia's struggle to ensure that regional changes are serving its geopolitical interests.[39] The Kingdom's reliance on international allies to preserve its security and pursue its regional interests was also endangered. Since its foundation, the Kingdom relied on external powers for security—first the British, then the United States (US). Since 2011, the Saudis became convinced that the divergence between Riyadh and Washington over the intended post-2011 regional order has hindered the Kingdom's regional interests. Following the US reluctance to intervene in Syria and their favourable policy toward Iran, the Kingdom discarded its traditional defence doctrine and attempted to rely on its own resources for security.[40] As the US seemed to be moving along with an Iranian nuclear deal despite Saudi concerns, the Kingdom needed regional allies.

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's attempts to build regional coalitions under its leadership did not have the desired result. In the Gulf, the Saudis insisted on deepening the GCC unity and institutionalisation. On numerous occasions, the Saudis proposed the institutionalisation of an expanded, tighter union for the GCC under their command.[41] However, King Abdullah's proposals for political integration in the Gulf collapsed in the

face of Oman's opposition and Kuwait's reluctance. In December 2013, Oman opposed Saudi plans for a unified command structure for the armed forces of the six states.[42] Kuwait refused to sign a GCC internal security pact, as it compromises its political liberalism and exceptional constitutional principles within the Gulf.[43] The emergence of Qatari-Emirati animosity over Libya and the MB in Egypt made Saudi ambitions of leading a regional coalition unattainable.[44]

The Saudi attempt to build new alliances under the Kingdom's leadership to balance Iran also foundered.[45] Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon exposed the Kingdom's failure in acting as a regional power able to influence regional outcomes. Relying on its Islamic identity, the Kingdom sought to place itself at the centre of a regional coalition to counter its long-lived enemy, Iran. Despite this, all Gulf states except Saudi Arabia and Bahrain approved the interim nuclear agreement between the US and Iran in November 2013.[46] Furthermore, Oman secretly hosted the preliminary negotiations between Iran and the US. Turkey, which seemed a natural member of a coalition against Iran, challenged the Saudi Kingdom's policies towards the MB in Egypt. This disagreement over the MB made an alliance with Turkey unattainable.

Henceforth, the Saudis saw in the coup d'état in Egypt an opportunity to overthrow the MB, and to form a regional coalition fostering the Kingdom's supremacy in the region. As the Kingdom accumulated significant financial and military capabilities over the decades, it sought a more favourable regional balance of power based on "patron-client" relationships.[47] Accordingly, the Saudi Kingdom expanded its financial and military resources to support authoritarian regimes, who later became the Kingdom's loyal allies. Noteworthy, Saudi efforts of authoritarian diffusion is driven by interests rather than an overarching ideological project. This logic is manifest in Saudi tactical

shifts towards the MB in Yemen. In its war against the Houthis, the Saudis allied with other groups, including al-Islah party, an MB offshoot in Yemen.[48]

Using its financial capabilities to promote authoritarian survival, the Kingdom emerged as an authoritarian regional patron encouraging its clients to outlaw the Brotherhood in their respective countries, pursuing active and deliberate policies to achieve this outcome through enticements and pressure. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Doha over anger at Qatar's support for the MB.[49] The Saudis exercised an unprecedented amount of pressure on Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, even the United Kingdom and France to criminalise the MB as terrorist.[50]

Saudi efforts to spread repression against the MB across the region constituted a case of vertical diffusion pressuring other states to follow its lead. The Saudi built patron-client relationships with other authoritarian regimes through foreign aid (Jordan), military support (Bahrain), or linkage due to geographic proximity (Kuwait and the UAE). This process of autocratic diffusion resulted in policy convergence for some cases (UAE) but not for others (Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan). The next section examines how recipient states responded to this vertical diffusion.

Autocratic (Non-)convergence

Following the Saudi designation of the MB as terrorist, the UAE pronounced the Brotherhood's local affiliates to be terrorist on 15 November 2014. In contrast, despite economic linkage and the convergence of interests with the strongest regional authoritarian power, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait resisted the adoption of repressive policies against the MB at home. These cases highlight the interaction between regime interests and domestic constraints in varying diffusion outcomes.

The UAE's decision was driven by regional interests as well as domestic structures. In the past decade, changes in leadership led to substantial changes in the monarchy's foreign behaviour. Although the founding ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed, relied on oil wealth to consolidate the confederation of the seven emirates, his son Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed developed a regional role for the UAE. The state emerged as a donor across the region,[51] aiming at acquiring a regional status and a power projection force through bombing targets in Libya, participating in the air campaign against the Islamic State, and supporting the Syrian opposition against Bashar al-Assad.[52] Moreover, the UAE acted as a Saudi ally in its rivalry with Iran. As Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed the UAE foreign minister stressed: "The UAE stands firmly with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in opposition to any Iranian attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the Arab states."[53]

Following the 2011 uprisings, this alliance between Saudi Arabia and the UAE manifested itself in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Egypt. Joining Saudi Arabia in the repression of the MB contributed to the UAE's regional interests, furthering its power and status. Since the overthrow of the MB in Egypt, the UAE emerged as one of the financial supporters of the al-Sissi's regime, and the designation of the group as terrorist conforms to its regional interests. Although Sheikh Zayed tolerated the MB's presence through the al-Islah group for decades, the group had little impact on the regime's domestic legitimacy. Since 2013, the UAE organised a regional campaign against the MB, portraying it as a transnational threat to regional and domestic security. Furthermore, the UAE, alongside Saudi Arabia, exercised pressure over other countries to crack down on the MB, including the UK.[54] In short, the UAE's decision was far motivated by ideological animosity with the MB. Instead, its regional interests played the dominant role in the decision.

In contrast, although Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan expressed their support for the al-Sissi repression of the MB, they resisted the emulation of repression at home. The MB has political offshoots across the Middle East, such as the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan and the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) in Kuwait.[55] Nevertheless, these regimes resisted the designation of their countries' respective movements as terrorist.

Bahrain

With the protests in Manama in February 2011, the wave of uprisings calling for political reforms reached the first Gulf monarchy. Initially, the protestors represented a cross-sectarian appeal against the regime. However, the regime portrayed these protests through a sectarian lens and branded them as Iranian attempts to destabilize the region. As the al-Khalifa regime was unable to suppress the protesters, it turned to the GCC for support. On 14 March 2011, Saudi Arabia sent 1200 armed forces personnel to Manama, who cleared the demonstrators from the Pearl roundabout. Furthermore, the Kingdom committed to the security of the al-Khalifa regime in the form of a US$ 500 million donation.[56]

Since then, the relationship between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia became an ever closer alliance. In return for Saudi support, the al-Khalifa remains the Saudis' strongest follower. Following their intervention, the regime survival depended on the flow of aid and military support from the Saudi Kingdom, which shaped Bahrain's regional interest. Yet, this interest did not lead the Bahrainis to follow the Saudi lead in designating the MB's local group as terrorist, an outcome driven by domestic considerations. Indeed, the MB in Bahrain, represented by the "Islamic Minbar," constitutes a crucial ally to the al-Khalifa regime. Alongside other Salafi groups, the Islamic Minbar joined a national unity front to stabilize the regime during the uprisings. Following the suppression of the

opposition, the ruling family in Bahrain sought to strengthen its ties with Sunni Islamist movements, including the MB, to balance the so-called "Shiite" protests.

As the Saudis called its ally to build a regional coalition against the Brotherhood, Bahrain was torn between satisfying its external supporter and maintaining a domestic ally. This struggle was manifest in the public statements of Bahrain's Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa. Following the Saudi designation of the MB as terrorist, he commented that his government will not label the Islamic Minbar as a terrorist organisation. He distinguished between the international organisation and the local branch in Bahrain and explained that "the MB have a particular status in Bahrain."[57] As this statement led to Saudi disappointment, Bahrain's foreign minister justified the regime's position: "The Muslim Brotherhood movement is a global movement with a single approach and is spread throughout the world, and will be dealt with according to the law of each country and the covenants to which it is party."[58] Following Saudi pressure, Bahrain announced its support to the Saudis and the UAE in fighting the MB across the region. Foreign Minister Khalid al-Khalifa insisted in several tweets that Bahrain fully supported Saudi Arabia and the UAE, stressing that any threat to the GCC fellows was a threat to Bahrain. However, the al-Khalifa regime remained, however, unwilling to list the Islamic Minbar group as terrorist.[59] It is therefore clear that Bahrain's regional interest emerged from its linkage with the Saudi Kingdom, which guaranteed its regime survival, and the MB did not pose an ideological threat to the Bahraini regime. Nevertheless, the regime was willing to take a regional position against the MB elsewhere, just not at home.

Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a small state endeavouring to survive domestic and regional threats.[60] Jordan often relied on external economic and financial support from the Gulf states and the US. Jordan found its regional interests converging with the Gulf states in counterbalancing Iran and leading counter-diffusion policies against revolutionary changes in 2011 to maintain regional allies. Jordan's constant need for external aid and, therefore, affluent regional allies constituted a systemic pressure influencing its foreign and domestic policy choices. Although Jordan's regional interests converged with Saudi ones in supporting the coup d'état in Egypt, the structure of the ruling coalition and its interaction with the local MB led to the country's non-convergence with repressive policies.

Prior to the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, Jordan developed a strong coalition with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which was known as "the moderate axis" or the "Arab centre."[61] Following the uprisings in Egypt and Syria, Jordan attempted to foster alliances and security cooperation with the GCC. Between 2011 and 2013, over half a million refugees crossed the borders into Jordan to escape the Syrian war. For a resource-poor country, Jordan has experienced harsh economic constraints, namely, vast budget deficits as a result of the compliance with the International Monetary Fund, which led to riots in November 2012.[62] For Jordan, maintaining the flow of cash coming from rich aid donors, namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE, became the priority for regime security.[63] Therefore, the threat of an ideational diffusion from the MB did not constitute an ultimate threat, considering the internal weakness of the group.

Jordan's position toward the new regime in Egypt and the fall of the MB was delicate. On the one hand, Jordan's interest was to maintain the Gulf aid while giving impetus to the new regime in Egypt to re-establish the so-called "moderate axis." This interest was evident in King Abdullah II's personal visit to Cairo after the ouster of

President Morsi, endorsing the new regime and re-establishing a close relationship with Egypt.[64]

Following Saudi and Emirati designations of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, rumours spread that the two Gulf states pressured Jordan to adopt similar repressive policies.[65] Although such policies could satisfy Jordan's regional interest, it would be costly to the country's domestic stability. The structure of the ruling coalition and its inclusive nature allowing close relations with societal groups led to Jordan's non-convergence with Saudi repressive policies. Historically, the Jordanian MB—through their political party the Islamic Action Front (IAF)—acted as a "loyal opposition," requesting reforms but generally co-opted by the royal palace until 1993.[66] With the peace treaty with Israel, this implicit alliance collapsed. Despite the tension between the group and the regime, the monarchy gives the MB the space to operate alongside other societal groups.[67] In March 2015, an internal crisis within the MB in Jordan led to the split of the group into two movements; some members of the group, led by Abdul-Majid Thunaibat, submitted an application to register an alternative MB in Jordan. In this crisis and with the rise of contending Salafi voices within the monarchy, the regime avoided weakening the MB and maintained a dialogue open with at least one of the movement's branches.[68] Any weakening of the existing Brotherhood could destabilize Jordan by prompting the rise of alternative movements that are less pragmatic and moderate.[69] The regime has therefore adopted a strategy combining integration and exclusion. Jordan did not follow the repressive policies adopted by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Nor did it integrate the group and engage with it political, as the Moroccan path.

Declaring the MB as a terrorist organisation could benefit Jordan's regional interests, but would risk its domestic stability by narrowing down its societal base and deepen the societal ethnic divide, i.e. between Palestinians and Transjordanians, which

might lead to destabilising the regime. Therefore, the regime sought to please external donors by weakening the MB using other means without banning it. When the MB deputy leader Zaki Bani Arshid attacked the UAE's decision to list the organisation as terrorist, the Jordanian authorities arrested him on the charge of "disrupting relations with a foreign state."[70] The Jordanian authorities defend their actions by stressing the economic interests that bind Jordan to the UAE.

Kuwait

Although Kuwait is one of the major financial supporters of the military regime in Egypt, it explicitly refused to declare its own MB to be terrorist, calling the Saudi labelling of the group an "internal affair."[71] The local MB in Kuwait is represented by the al-Islah movement and its political wing, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM, known by its Arabic acronym as Hadas). Emerging initially in the 1960s, it established itself as a political actor by winning seats in the parliament following the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The ICM has positioned itself as a bridge between liberals and hardline Salafis in the emirate.[72] The emergence of this political activism was allowed by the nature of the seemingly participatory political system in Kuwait.

The overthrow of Morsi in Egypt and the crackdown on the MB across the region has reverberated in Kuwait. On the one hand, the ICM criticised the Kuwaiti government for supporting the military regime in Egypt, which created domestic divisions. Moreover, the ICM has been subject to criticism from politicians and public opinion in Kuwait. On the other hand, external pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE for Kuwait to join the coalition intensified. For example, the UAE arrested Brotherhood members accused of plotting against the ruling family and linked some prominent Kuwaitis to the arrested group, portraying the ICM as part of a regional movement rather than a mere Kuwaiti

political actor.[73] Still, although the regime in Kuwait, allied with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, supported the oppression of the MB in Egypt, it took a less repressive stance vis-à-vis the local MB due to the latter's involvement in politics and its implicit agreement with the regime to balance leftist and extremist Salafi groups since 1990. In short, the IMC is an opposition movement whose presence and activity contribute to the legitimacy and survival of the al-Sabah regime and thus could not be sacrificed to please Saudi ambitions.[74]

Conclusion

This article has problematised why autocratic diffusion of repression processes lead to policy convergence in some cases but not in others. The existing literature is divided between scholars focusing on the role of ideology and those focusing on interests as the primary driver of autocratic behaviour. This article presents a complex understanding of regime interests by exploring how authoritarian regimes are receptive to the diffusion of repression. From an IR perspective, neorealism argues that interests evolving from the regional environment shape states' interests and, hence, policy choices regardless of regime type and domestic factors. The increasing abandonment of such an extreme stance allowed a fruitful engagement between IR and Comparative Politics. This article has demonstrated that diffusion of repression is a dynamic process in which authoritarian regime's interests are in constant interaction between its position in the regional structure and its domestic structure enabling or constraining the pursuit of this interest regionally. It thus shows that variations in diffusion outcomes require a multi-level analysis, including systemic and domestic factors. Henceforth, neoclassical realism constitutes a fertile ground for theory development to examine how autocratic policies operate at regional and international levels.

The cases of Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait show that the interactive dynamics of regional interests and domestic structures led to distinct patterns of behaviour in reaction to regional pressures from the Saudi Kingdom. All three regimes had interests in supporting the authoritarian regime in Egypt, such as regional alliances in the case of Jordan or fear of revolution as in the cases of Kuwait and Bahrain. Domestic structures, however, functioned as intervening variables making the pursuit of regime interests at the regional level permissible in the case of the UAE but unbearable in the cases of Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait.

These empirical cases make several contributions to the existing literature on the international dimensions of authoritarianism. First, whereas scholars have broadly addressed diffusion as an unintentional process, the case of Saudi Arabia provides novel insights on diffusion as a vertical process involving external pressure. Second, the non-convergence of Saudi clients to the Kingdom's diffusion efforts showed that diffusion is a process where senders and recipients are independent agents able to influence its outcome. Henceforth, this article moved beyond the study of diffusion as a mechanism. Instead, diffusion is a process involving both active senders and, crucially, active recipients. Third, the cases of Bahrain and Jordan, in particular, show that economic linkage does not necessarily lead to diffusion. Despite their dependence on Saudi aid both Bahrain and Jordan resisted Saudi external pressure**.** Fourth, this study illuminates other cases of diffusion of autocratic policies, such as the military intervention in Yemen, where Gulf states joined the Saudi-led coalition except Oman. Also, the argument sheds light on the diffusion of repression against Shiite communities across the region.

In conclusion, the analysis of diffusion of repression in the Middle East politics has theoretical relevance that goes beyond the diffusion literature. It shows that a serious engagement between IR and Comparative Politics can lead to theory

development. On the one hand, a close examination of authoritarian behaviour at the intersection of regional and domestic levels provides enlightens authoritarian foreign behaviour. On the other hand, the literature on autocratic diffusion can benefit from the mid-range theories developed within IR presenting a more nuanced understanding of the ideology versus interest debate.

Country	Muslim Brotherhood Movement
Egypt	MB Political wing: The Freedom and Justice Party
Tunis	Al-Nahda Party
Kuwait	Al-Islah movement Its political wing: Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM)
Jordan	The Islamic Action Front (IAF)
UAE	Al-Islah Movement
Bahrain	The Islamic Minbar
Yemen	MB is a dominant group within Al-Islah Party

Figure (1): The MB and their offshoots in the Arab world[75]

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Notes

[1] Solingen, “Of Dominoes and Firewalls: The Domestic, Regional and Global Politics of International Diffusion,” 631.
[2] I use “autocratic” to designate the non-democratic practices and policies and “authoritarian” for the regime type.
[3] Yadav, “Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood and the Perils of Powersharing.”
[4] For more details on the history of interaction between the Egyptian regime and the MB, see al-Awadi “A Struggle for Legitimacy” and el-Ghobashy “The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers.”
[5] Some of the scholarship on the practice of securitisation have mentioned the use of securitisation to construct issues and actors as existential threats to consolidate authoritarian rule. See Vuori “Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitization” and Holm “Algeria: Securitization of State/Regime, Nation and Islam.”
[6] Al-Rasheed, “Saudi Arabia Pleased with Morsi’s Fall.”
[7] Darwich, “The Ontological (In)security of Similarity.”
[8] Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner, “Would Autocracies Promote Autocracy?”; Burnell and Schlumberger, “Promoting Democracy – Promoting Autocracy?”
[9] Strang, “Adding Social Structure to Diffusion Models: An Event History Framework,” 325.
[10] Solingen, “Of Dominoes and Firewalls: The Domestic, Regional and Global Politics of International Diffusion.”
[11] Börzel and Risse, “From Europeanisation to Diffusion: Introduction’; Gilardi, ‘Transnational Diffusion: Norms, Ideas, and Policies.”
[12] Elkins and Simmons, “On Waves, Clusters, and Diffusion,” 6.
[13] Ambrosio, “Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion,” 378; Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett, “The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition, or Learning?”
[14] Strang and Soule, “Diffusion in Organizations and Social Movements: From Hybrid Corn to Poison Pills,” 271.
[15] Solingen, “Of Dominoes and Firewalls: The Domestic, Regional and Global Politics of International Diffusion,” 632.
[16] See Elkins and Simmons, “On Waves, Clusters, and Diffusion”.
[17] Knill, “Introduction”.
[18] Solingen and Börzel, “Introduction to Presidential Issue,” 182.
[19] Odinuis and Kuntz, “The Limits of Authoritarian Solidarity.”
[20] Weyland, “The Diffusion of Authoritarian Rule.”
[21] Haas, *The Clash of Ideologies*, 3–4.
[22] Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*, 25–28.
[23] Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing”; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*; Taliaferro, “State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State.”
[24] Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 146.
[25] Aras and Falk, “Authoritarian ‘Geopolitics’ of Survival in the Arab Spring,” 327–28.
[26] Ripsman, “Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Interest Groups.”
[27] Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution*.
[28] Salloukh, “Regime Autonomy and Regional Foreign Policy Choices in the Middle East: A Theoretical Explanation.”
[29] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 23-24.
[30] The crackdown on the MB included several acts, such as banning the group’s party—the Freedom and Justice Party—shutting down the MB-led media, freezing the members’ assets, arresting MB figures, prohibiting demonstrations in support of the MB, using extreme violence against the groups’ members,

carrying out death sentences against members of the group and their supporters Brown and Dunne, "Unprecedented Pressures, Uncharted Course for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood."
[31] Egypt Independent, "Excerpts from General Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi's Speech."
[32] The Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research (Baseera) announced that 57% of Egyptians consider the Muslim Brotherhood as source of violence. See Baseera, "Egyptians' Sentiments Towards the Muslim Brotherhood." One year after assuming the Egyptian presidency, 9 out of 10 Egyptians had supported al-Sissi. See Baseera, "President Approval: 1 Year."
[33] Usher, "Saudi Arabia Declares Muslim Brotherhood 'Terrorist Group'."
[34] Kneuer and Demmelhuber, "Gravity Centres of Authoritarian Rule."
[35] Tansey, "The Problem with Autocracy Promotion" 150.
[36] Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution."
[37] Wehrey et al., *Saudi Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*.
[38] Darwich, "The Ontological (In)security of Similarity."
[39] Echangue, "Saudi Arabia: Emboldened Yet Vulnerable"; Ryan, "Inter-Arab Relations and the Regional System."
[40] Kenner, "Iran Deal Threatens to Upend a Delicate Balance of Power in the Middle East."
[41] Ryan, "Jordan, Morocco and an Expanded GCC."
[42] Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Moving Ahead with Gulf Union."
[43] Asayed, "Bridging the Gulf: Where Kuwait Stands on the GCC Union."
[44] al-Buluwi, "UAE and Qatar Compete as Saudi Arabia Looks on."
[45] Gause, "Why Isn't There an Anti-Iran Alliance?"
[46] Gresh, "Saudi Arabia Feels Insecure."
[47] Aras and Falk, "Authoritarian 'Geopolitics' of Survival in the Arab Spring," 329.
[48] Wehrey, "Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats."
[49] Black, "Arab States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar in Protest at 'Interference'."
[50] Tarbush, "Has Cameron Buckled to Pressure from Middle East Allies?"; Dickinson, "Saudi Action Puts Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait on Spot."
[51] Almezaini, *The UAE and Foreign Policy*.
[52] Gause, "Understanding the Gulf States."
[53] Al-Harthi, "Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the Region's New Equation."
[54] Ramesh, "UAE Told UK."
[55] Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*.
[56] Hassan, "Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda?" 10.
[57] Saloum, "Bahrain Brotherhood and Saudi Categorization."
[58] Hatlani, "Bahrain Between Its Backers and the Brotherhood."
[59] Toumi, "Bahrain Confirms Full Support to Saudi Arabia, UAE."
[60] Salloukh, "State Strength, Permeability, and Foreign Policy Behavior: Jordan in a Theoretical Perspective"; Ryan, *Inter-Arab Alliances*.
[61] Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation*.
[62] Satloff and Schenker, "Political Instability in Jordan," 5.
[63] Ryan, "Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East."
[64] El-Kholy, "Prospects for Egyptian-Jordanian Cooperation Remain Hazy."
[65] Al-Monitor, "Jordan Pressured to Restrict Muslim Brotherhood."
[66] Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism*, 95.
[67] Bondokji, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan: Time to Reform," 1.
[68] Ryan, "Regime Security and Shifting Alliances in the Middle East."
[69] Bondokji, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan," 2.
[70] Al-Monitor, "Jordan Pressured to Restrict Muslim Brotherhood."
[71] Dickinson, "Saudi Action Puts Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait on Spot."
[72] Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*, 224–230.
[73] Williamson and Brown, "Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood under Pressure."
[74] Al-Kandari, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait: The Benefits of Alliance with the Regime and the Costs of Opposition [in Arabic]."
[75] Author's own figure.